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The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

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28 February 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth
National Intelligence Officer for USSR

George Kolt
National Intelligence Officer for Europe

SUBJECT: Impact of the Afghanistan War on the USSR

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] It is my 25X1
impression [redacted] that it has understated or 25X1
given insufficient emphasis to what we know about the impact of this war
already on the USSR. By focusing too heavily on the performance of the
resistance and strictly military aspects of the war inside Afghanistan, the
larger impact of the war and its potential impact in the future may not be
adequately registered with policymakers and oversight figures.

2. This imbalance can easily be corrected, although we cannot claim to
have a definitive view of the impact of the war on the USSR.

3. The resources for doing this are at hand:

[redacted] paper of last fall. 25X1

[redacted] the view of the war from within 25X1
the Soviet military.

Draft material in preparation for a SNIE on near-term Soviet
prospects.

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Interviews and other reporting from Soviet POW/deserters in the Western and emigre press.

4. The major themes deserving stress are the following:

5. Soviet material and manpower resources committed to Afghanistan are not large in percentage terms. Yet these figures understate the potential impact on the USSR of Soviet involvement.

This is the biggest Soviet military operation since World War II.

It is a longer war than World War II, and could last years more.

It is being fought almost entirely by Soviets of the post-war and post-Stalin generations.

6. Our estimate of casualties and killed (20,000/5000) does not depict a massive bloodletting, although it is probably conservative. Yet the casualty level has been high enough to sprinkle a lot of zinc coffins and wounded into the USSR. The Soviet command is clearly concerned about casualty levels because of their impact at home, and this is an operational constraint.

7. Some 50,000 Soviet troopers cycle back into the USSR from the war every year. That means about a quarter of a million veterans.

8. Returnees have, so far, been instructed not to talk about the war with relatives and friends. But they surely do so. The net affect of this situation, plus what they say about the war, is to magnify the image of a dirty, shameful struggle.

9. [REDACTED] indicate bad human and morale conditions among Soviet forces in Afghanistan: drugs, alcohol, poor health conditions, abuse by officers, black marketeering, officially and unofficially committed atrocities.

10. [REDACTED] an almost uniformly dark view of the war, how the Soviets are faring, and ultimate prospects for victory among troops and mid-level officers. These Soviets appreciate that they are fighting on the wrong side of a real peoples' war and don't see how they can win it, although [REDACTED] usually report Soviet determination to soldier on.

11. Soviet internal propaganda over the years indicates considerable wariness on the part of the leadership in depicting the war to the population.

For several years, the Soviets refused to admit that this is a real war, but stressed the "civic action" side.

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Now this is changing, with increased emphasis on real combat, heroic exploits, care for veterans, etc.

No doubt this shift is intended to stir patriotic sentiments. Yet there could be the reverse effect and Soviet authorities are clearly worried about this.

12. It is remarkable that top Soviet leaders hardly ever mention Afghanistan in domestic speeches and almost never venture an extended interpretation of the war to internal, public audiences. They may be operating from an overly rosy view of how the war is actually going, but their reluctance to say anything serious about the war probably springs from worry about how the whole issue is playing in popular attitudes.

13. Soviet leaders have some understanding of Russian history: It tells them that protracted, costly wars on the periphery, which fail to mobilize patriotic sentiments, at a time when the system is facing other serious problems at home, including the effectiveness of the leadership itself, can make for a dangerous situation.


George Kolt


Fritz W. Ermarth

cc: D/SOVA
DDO/C/NE DIVISION

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